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ALERT TOP STORY

From humble beginnings, UpValley Family Centers now serves thousands

Jesse Duarte

Nov 26, 2024

The UpValley Family Centers is celebrating its 25th anniversary, but its name is still as modest as ever.

Maybe that's because a more comprehensive name would be too much of a mouthful. It would be something like the UpValley Family, Youth, Senior, Immigrant, Tenant, Farmworker, Taxpayer, and Aspiring Citizen Centers.

The nonprofit serves all of those groups and more in St. Helena, Calistoga and outlying areas. Its staff of 40 serves between 3,000 and 4,800 people every year, serving as a hub for dozens of government and nonprofit programs that serve vulnerable populations.

“There's no sign that the need for the family center is going to decrease,” said board member Doug Boeschen. “Based on our growth and history, especially over the last 10 years, it's easy to predict that the family center is going to continue to grow to meet those needs.”

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The organization traces its roots back to the founding of the Calistoga Family Center in 1999. It started in partnership with the Calistoga Joint Unified School District and initially focused on connecting students and their parents with health resources and government assistance like CalFresh and WIC. It also ran programs like Second Step, which enhances students' social-emotional skills.

An evolving mission

It soon became clear that Calistoga needed more services, so the family center expanded its mission to include seniors. For example, residents of Calistoga's senior mobile home parks faced rent increases that were forcing them to choose between paying rent and buying food and medication, so one family center board member who was also a lawyer represented them in court pro bono.

In 2014 the Calistoga Family Center merged with the St. Helena Family Center, which had launched in 2005 with an emphasis on helping families achieve economic success and offering financial classes like Money Smart.

The organizations were already offering many of the same programs, and the merger streamlined administration and left more funds available for services.

“It allowed us to take a comprehensive approach to supporting the whole Upvalley region,” executive director Jenny Ocon said.

Staff members gradually gained the trust of clients, many of them Spanish-speakers who tend to steer clear of government institutions and law enforcement. The bilingual staff never asks about anybody's immigration status.

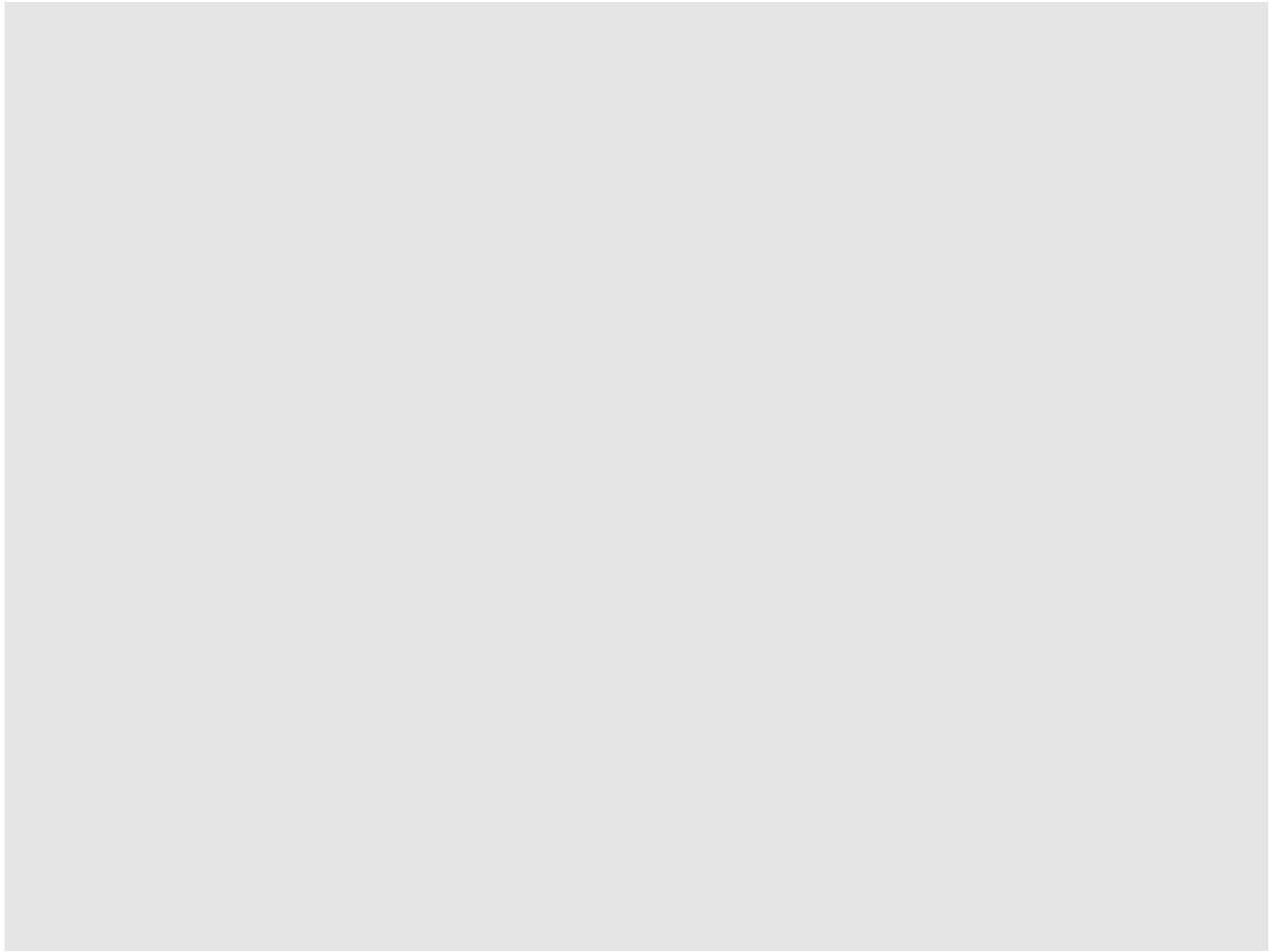
“They can come to us without fear, knowing that their information isn’t going to immigration or the police,” program director Indira Lopez said. “We built that trust. We don’t just give them a phone number to call. We form a relationship.”

The UpValley Family Centers offers a program that has helped more than 300 immigrants earn U.S. citizenship. Three staff members are certified by the U.S. Department of Justice to file citizenship applications and other immigration forms on their clients’ behalf.

Other programs

A Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program offered free tax preparation assistance to 600 local residents this year.

Some volunteers with deep community connections serve as Promotoras, offering outreach and education to the community on everything from public health to the U.S. Census.



The UpValley Family Centers' Promotoras are specialized volunteers who offer services relating to public health, the U.S. Census and get-out-the-vote efforts.

Submitted photo

The Promotoras have worked for free, some of them since the program's inception in 2008, but now nine of the 13 Promotoras are forming their own worker-owned cooperative so they can contract with government and nonprofit service providers to administer programs and get paid for their work.

"Those women are bona fide superheroes," Boeschen said.

The UVFC has offices at Calistoga Elementary School and St. Helena's elementary and high schools, where staff members work with administrators to identify children who need help. Kids who need academic help are connected with volunteer tutors.

The center offers CLARO and CLARA, youth mentoring programs for boys and girls, respectively, and works with local youth diversion programs. One staff member, Adriana Avalos, was so inspired by her partnership with the St. Helena Police Department's school resource officer that she joined the police force earlier this year.

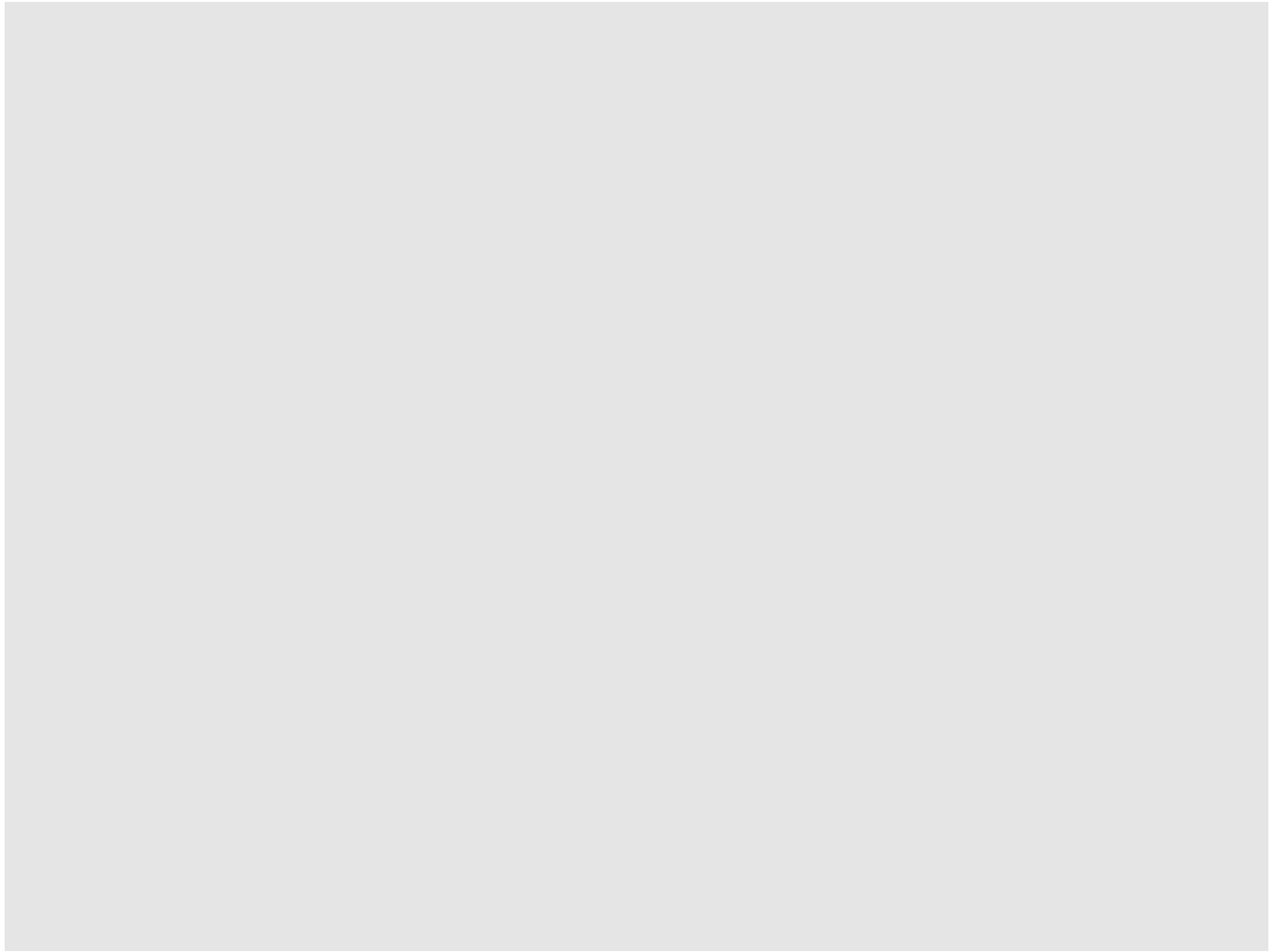
New needs, new services

UpValley services are constantly changing based on community demand. The family center gave gift cards and other assistance to clients who had lost income — and in some cases their jobs — during the wildfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even during the early days of the pandemic in 2020, the staff worked from home and arranged for clients to pick up forms or applications — all disinfected — at the center's largely vacant headquarters on Spring Street. In Calistoga, UVFC staffers in full protective gear offered bilingual support to Spanish-speakers arriving at the Napa County Fairgrounds for drive-through COVID-19 testing.

“We never stopped working during the pandemic,” Lopez said. “We created our own little workspaces at home.”

The UVFC has seen more demand for rent assistance as housing costs have escalated. Program director Lupe Maldonado said some clients have been forced to move to Solano or Lake counties, but still commute to St. Helena to go to work and take their kids to school. Other families live in overcrowded conditions because they can't afford their own rental units.



UpValley Family Centers staff promote the U.S. Census.

Submitted photo

The UVFC tracks how much their clients are spending on rent versus how much they're earning at work. Ocon said the majority of clients are "rent-burdened," meaning they spend 30% or more of their income on housing.

That goes hand in hand with an increase in food insecurity, since high rental costs leave families with less money to spend on food and other necessities.

Fear of mass deportation

Ocon said there's "a lot of concern" among clients about potential mass deportations under the incoming Trump administration.

“We’re also hearing from community members who want St. Helena to feel like a safe place,” Ocon said. “We’re focused on helping people understand what their rights are and that we’re here for them.”

UpValley has enlisted some community members to respond on short notice to reports of immigration enforcement activity. Those volunteers are trained not to interfere, but to document what they see and look for any civil rights violations.

“You have constitutional rights in this country, whether you’re documented or undocumented,” Lopez said.

In St. Helena, immigration enforcement has tended to target individuals, not groups. Yet during the first Trump administration, false reports of immigration raids tended to go viral on social media and spread more fear than fact.

“People get panicked for nothing because their stress level is so high,” Lopez said. “Whenever we would get a call that there was ICE presence, we would drive there ourselves to verify. If it was nothing, we would post that, telling people (to not) panic.”

Ocon said kids are also affected by that sense of fear — not to mention by the “heated rhetoric” they hear on the news and social media.

Looking ahead

Organizers of the Calistoga Family Center in 1999 could hardly have guessed how much the project would grow in 25 years. Today’s staff and board members say it’s equally hard to guess where the UpValley Family Centers is headed.

Ocon said the UVFC is trying to support more Upvalley residents who live in remote areas outside St. Helena and Calistoga. For example, Angwin families who lost power for more than 48 hours during last winter’s storms were eligible for gift cards to replace the contents of their refrigerators.

“We’ve been through so many crisis points, and we know we’ll always have to pivot to meet that moment,” Ocon said.

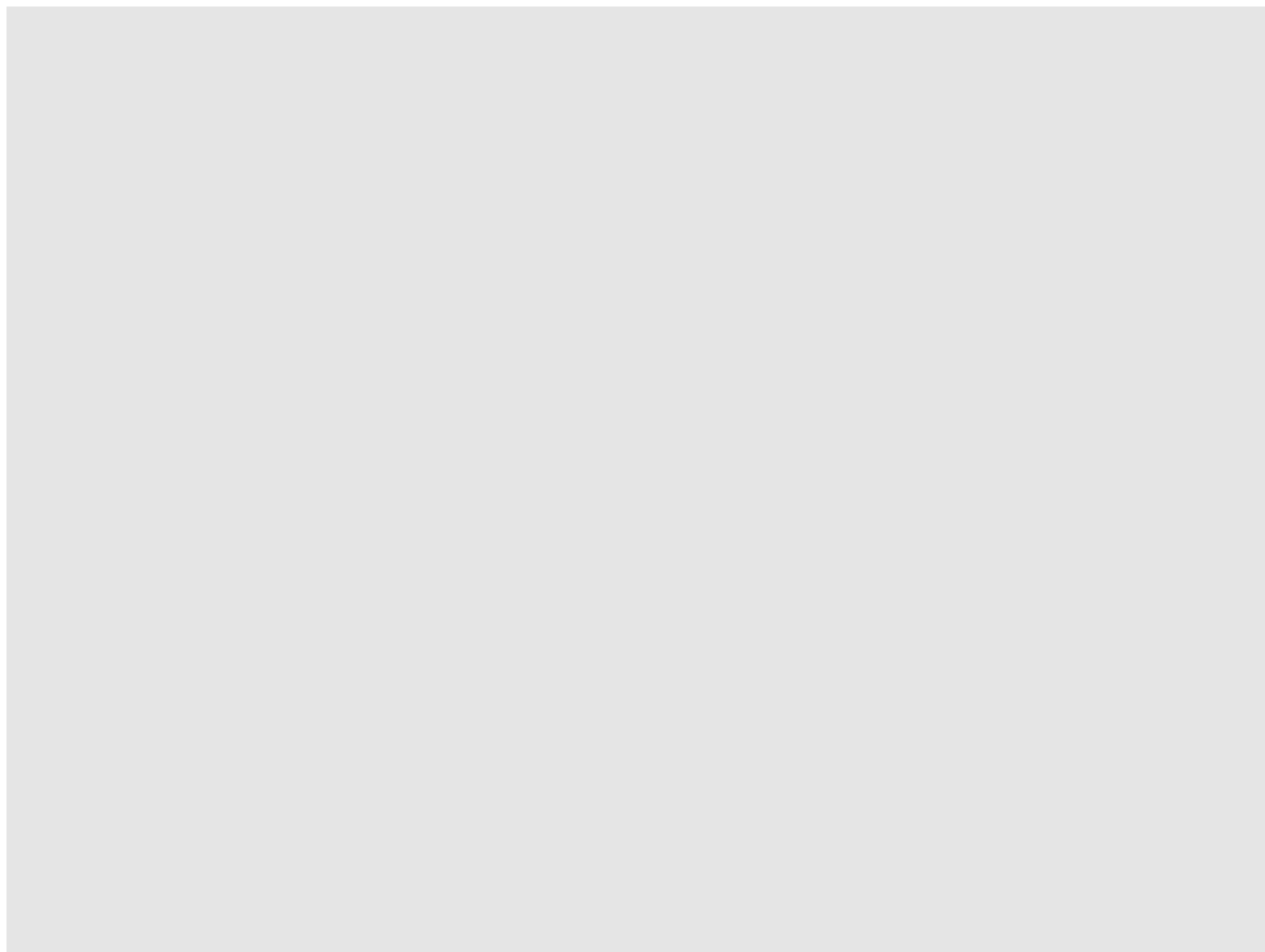
Ocon said expenses inevitably creep up every year, but the UVFC has a solid base of support from government grants, corporate donors and private donations.

“We’re fortunate to have a reserve, so this organization doesn’t live month to month,” said board member Terry Byrnes Fiddaman. “Not all nonprofits can say that.”

It’s also seeking more donors to make multi-year pledges as part of a “sustainers’ circle.” Multi-year recurring pledges — even small ones of \$100 or less — help the UVFC gauge how much money it will have to sustain today’s programs.

Photos: Upvalley Family Centers extend a helping hand to valley residents

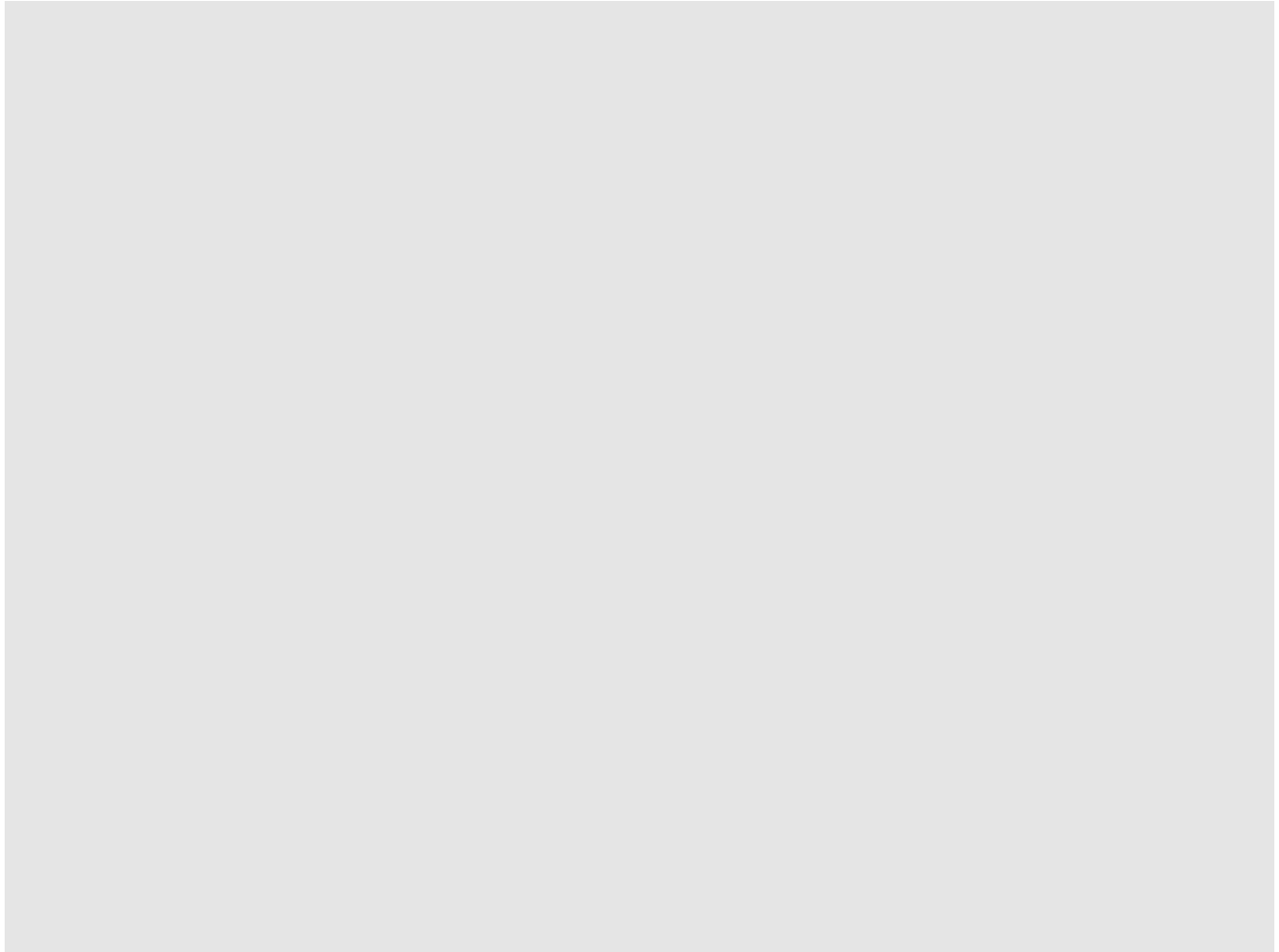
UpValley Family Centers 2



Jameson Ogletree, 3, and his dad Nick build a gingerbread house during a gingerbread house decorating party co-hosted by UpValley Family Centers and the St. Helena Fire Department on Dec. 11.

Nick Otto, Register file photo

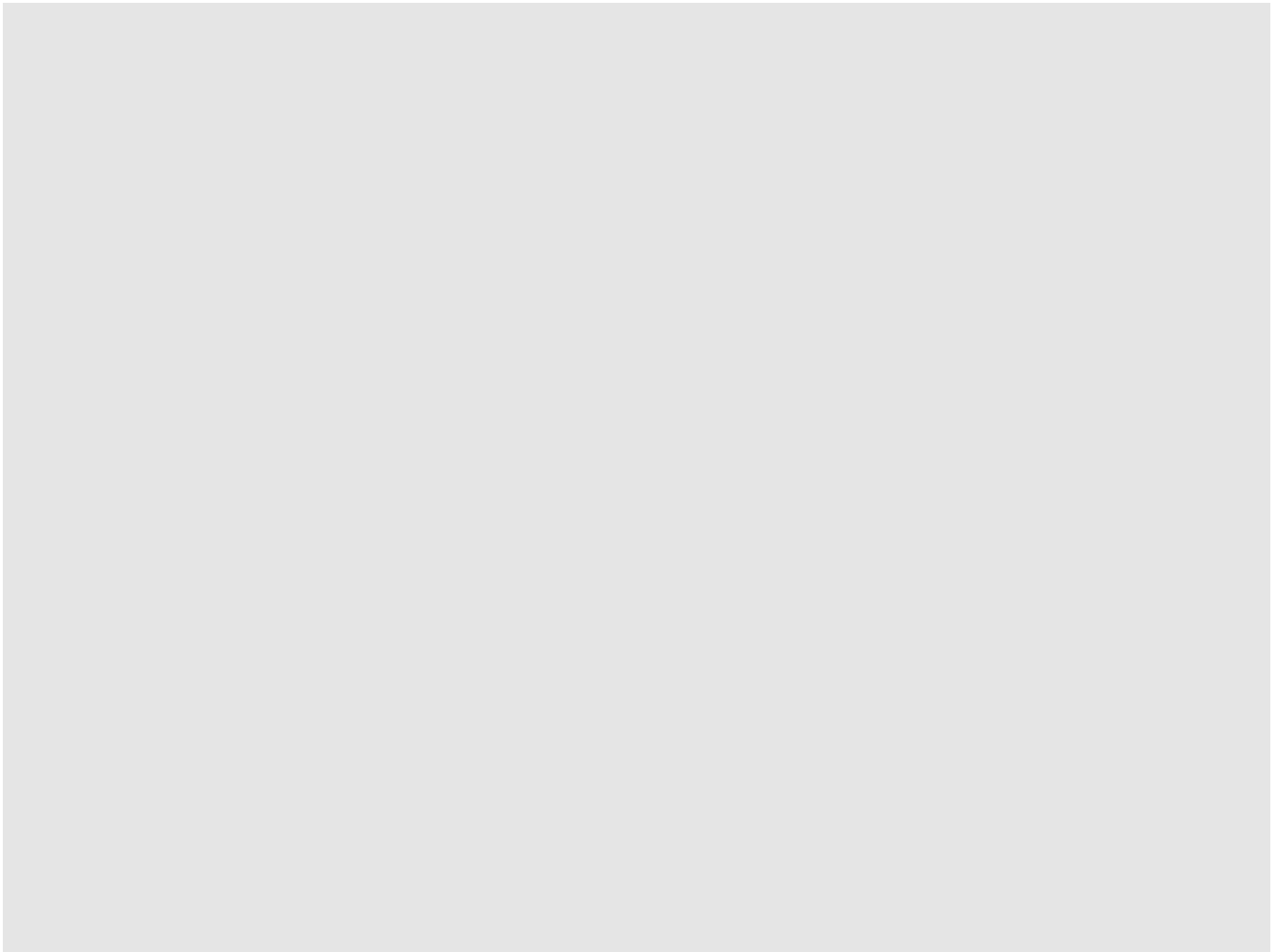
UpValley Family Centers 3



Kids sit with Santa during a gingerbread house decorating party co-hosted by UpValley Family Centers and the St. Helena Fire Department in St. Helena on Sunday.

Nick Otto, Register

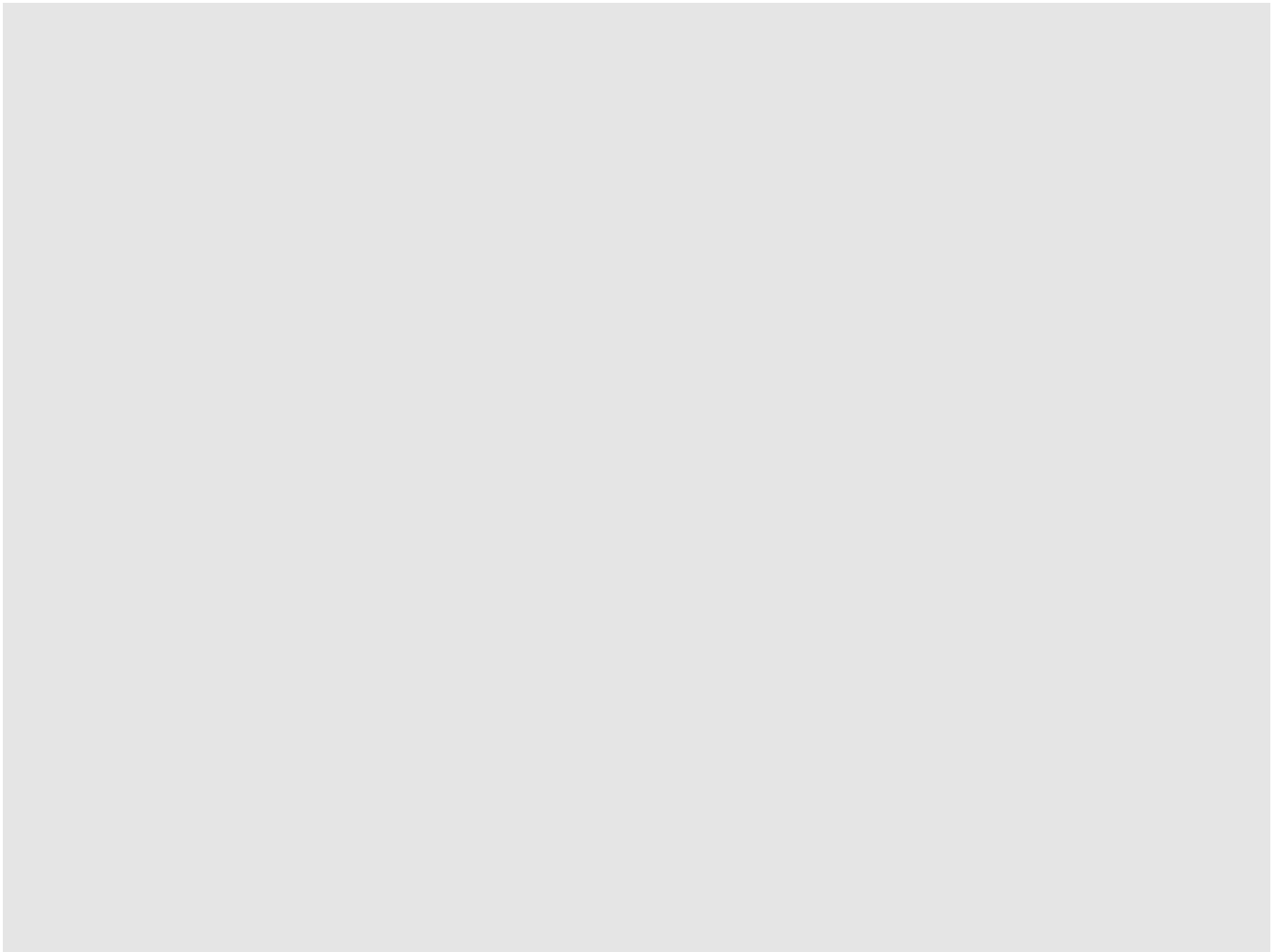
UpValley Family Centers 4



People are seen riding in a vintage fire truck during a gingerbread house decorating party co-hosted by UpValley Family Centers and the St. Helena Fire Department in St. Helena on Sunday.

Nick Otto, Register

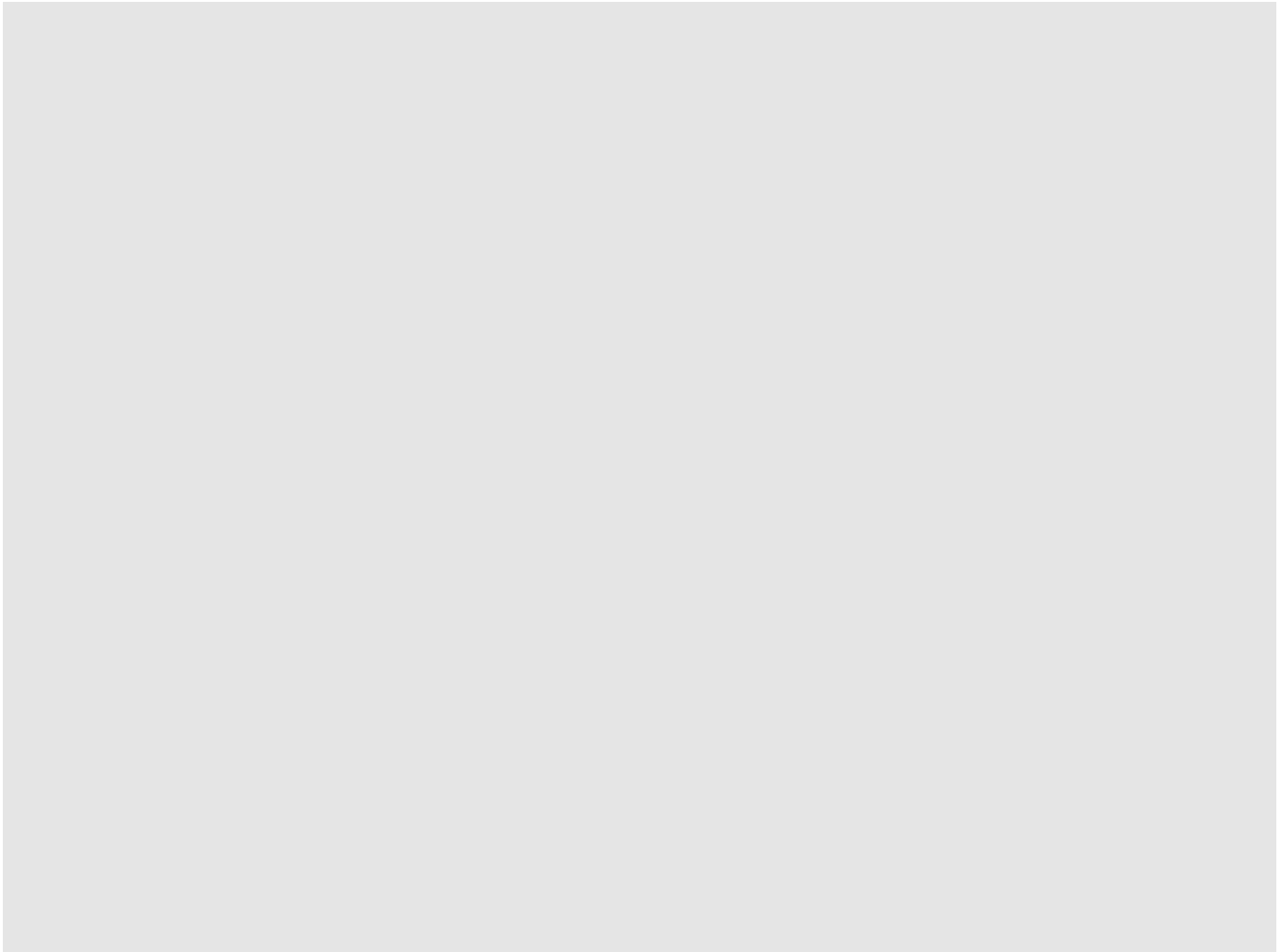
UpValley Family Centers 5



People are seen outside the St. Helena Fire Department waiting for ride in a vintage fire truck during a gingerbread house during a gingerbread house decorating party co-hosted by UpValley Family Centers and the St. Helena Fire Department in St. Helena on Sunday.

Nick Otto, Register

UpValley Family Centers 1



UpValley Family Centers volunteers hand out gingerbread house kits during a gingerbread house decorating party co-hosted by the nonprofit and St. Helena Fire in December 2022.

Nick Otto, Register file photo

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By Jesse Duarte

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